



# Historical Treasures of The National Library of Medicine

Cover: Artists delineating plants, from Leonhard Fuchs' herbal,  
*De historia stirpium* (1542).

The pamphlet is published in conjunction with an exhibit prepared by Mrs. Dorothy Hanks in November, 1985. Graphics for the exhibit and this brochure were prepared by Daniel Carangi.

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History of Medicine Division  
National Library of Medicine  
8600 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, Maryland 20894



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8600 Rockville Pike  
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Title page illustration: “*Die Kranke und ihre Kinder*,” a 1920 lithograph by Kathe Kollwitz.



Dr. John Shaw Billings, Director of the Library from 1865 to 1895.

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Like so many other things at the National Library of Medicine, the beginnings of the historical collections are associated with the efforts of John Shaw Billings, Director of the Library from 1865 to 1895. When Army surgeon Billings took charge of the Library of the Office of the Surgeon General of the United States Army, the predecessor of the National Library of Medicine, there were only a handful of historical items in the collection. The catalog issued in 1865, just before Billings became the librarian, listed no incunabula (i.e., books printed during the early years of printing with moveable type, from the middle through the end of the 15th century), no 16th- or 17th-century books, and only seven 18th-century titles. By 1868, only three years after Billings became responsible for the collection, the Library owned two incunabula, seventeen 16th-century titles, fifty 17th-century titles, and one hundred and sixty-two 18th-century titles. During his administration, the Library also began to acquire historical manuscripts and pictures.

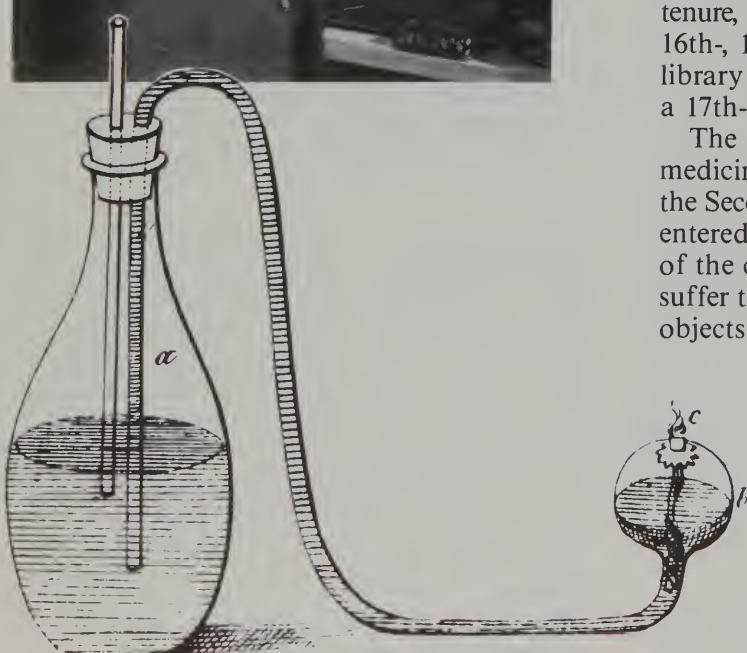
Billings continued to build the historical collections, as well as the rest of the Library,

throughout his tenure, through purchases, gifts and exchanges. He was always on the lookout for new acquisitions. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote of him:

Dr. Billings is a bibliophile of such eminence that I regard him as a positive danger to the owner of a library, if he ever be let loose in it.

After Billings left the Library, an interest in medical history was maintained through the work of Fielding Hudson Garrison, who held various positions at the Library during the period 1891–1930. In 1912, Garrison published a list of classic texts in the history of medicine from the Library's collection, based on an exhibit that he had prepared. This list was the forerunner of the classic Garrison and Morton bibliography of texts illustrating the history of medicine, now in its fourth edition. During his tenure at the Library, Garrison also wrote his famous **Introduction to the History of Medicine**, first published in 1913.

Dr. John Blake, Chief of the History of Medicine Division from 1961 to 1982.



Meanwhile the historical collections continued to grow. The Library published its first list of the incunabula collection, then numbering 231, in 1917. The incunabula had been separated from the rest of the collection and housed in display cases already in Billings' time. However, most of the historically valuable books and manuscripts were scattered throughout the stacks with the modern publications. There was no separately organized historical collection or division. The Library became unbelievably liberal in lending rare books after Billings' tenure, not infrequently sending out incunabula, 16th-, 17th- and 18th-century books on interlibrary loan. One patron was allowed to keep a 17th-century book from 1913 to 1915!

The establishment of a separate history of medicine section had to await the impetus of the Second World War. When the United States entered the war, fears were aroused that many of the cultural treasures of the country might suffer the destruction that had befallen similar objects in Europe as a result of bombing raids.



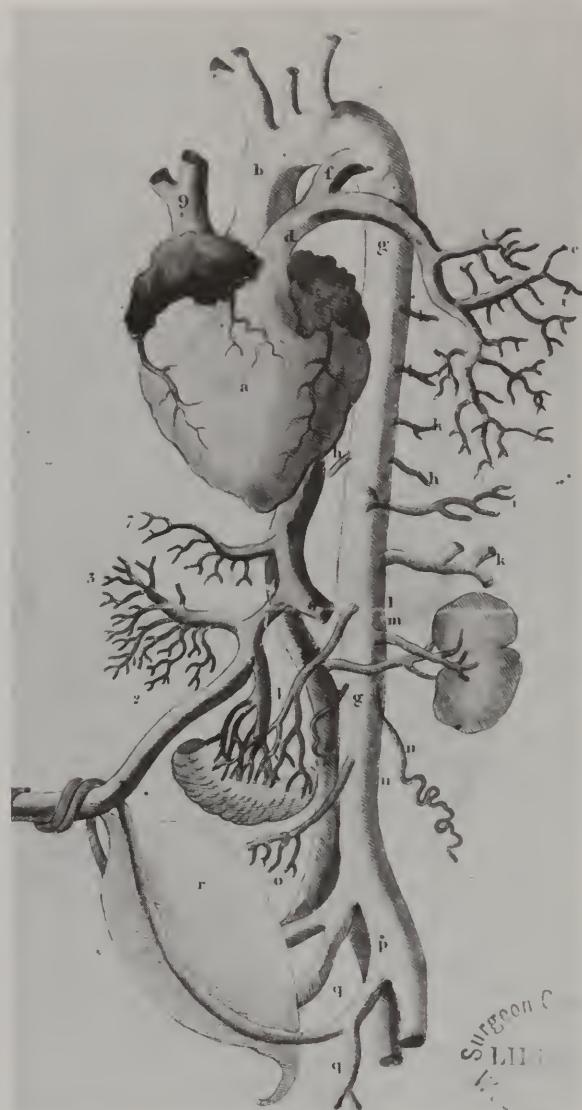
Expert bookbinder Jean Eschmann restoring one of the Library's rare books, 1944.

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 et de eius caudi p[er] fieri ele  
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Surgical instruments depicted in 15th-century manuscript of Guy de Chauliac, distinguished French surgeon.

Washington was viewed as a likely target if enemy bombers were to attack the United States, and the Librarian of Congress and the United States Archivist asked libraries and museums in the Washington area about their plans for storing irreplaceable items in safe areas. Harold Wellington Jones, then Director of the Army Medical Library (as the Surgeon General's Library had come to be called), boxed the incunabula collection and stored it in the basement. The 16th-, 17th- and 18th century books, most of which had been scattered throughout the collection, were brought together for the first time and boxed.

Jones wanted to set up a small branch library near Washington to store the historical books,



"Plan of the foetal circulation," a broadside published in Philadelphia in 1818.

but was told to find a place in the Midwest, which would presumably be safe from bombing raids. He looked at various sites offered the government, and decided upon the Dudley Allen Memorial Library in Cleveland, owned by the Cleveland Medical Library Association. The trustees offered the space rent-free, requesting only that the government pay a proportionate share of the cost of maintaining the building. The final agreement called for rent of \$1.00 a year plus \$8,000 for expenses, with privilege of renewal for eight years. Max H. Fisch, then Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Western Reserve University, was recruited to be civilian head of the branch, and two librarians and some clerical staff were also hired.

Beginning in the summer of 1942, the historical books and documents were shipped to Cleveland, in all a total of 952 boxes. As no real conservation work had been done at the Library up to this time, many of the books were in poor shape: pages were sometimes loose or torn, covers were warped and split, and spines were broken. The Library entered into a contract with Jean Eschmann, a master bookbinder, to rebind and/or restore the books in need of such work. During the years that the historical collection was in Cleveland, some 10,000 volumes were repaired, rebound or restored.

In 1945, the Cleveland branch officially became the History of Medicine Division. It was expected that the historical collection would be returned to Washington when the war ended, but the Library's building on the mall was overcrowded and had already overflowed into temporary quarters. The lease with the Cleveland Medical Library Association therefore continued to be renewed, and the historical collection was destined to remain separated from the rest of the Library for a total of two decades.

At one point during this period, a suggestion was made by an Army colonel, in a report on an inspection of the historical division, that consideration should be given to microfilming all the volumes published prior to 1925, selling of the originals, and closing down the Cleveland operation, which was costing the Army \$75,000 per year and was of little practical use to Army personnel. In a report to the Library's Honorary Consultants in 1950, William Jerome Wilson, Chief of the History of Medicine Division defended the retention of the collection, pointing out that the government could no doubt sell the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence for enormous sums if national sentiment did not deter it. Refusing to argue for the value of history on strictly utilitarian grounds, Wilson argued that the history of medicine, like other scientific and cultural pursuits, was worth pursuing for its own sake.

When the new building for the Library, which by this time had become the National Library of Medicine, was completed in Bethesda and ready for occupancy in 1962, there was



Frontispiece to *Taplin Improved: or A Complete Treatise on the Art of Farriery* (1815), an early American work of veterinary medical interest.

finally room to move the historical books from Cleveland and reunite them with the rest of the collection. Four vans, each guarded by a Pinkerton detective, moved the materials to Bethesda. The collection was insured in transit by Lloyd's of London for six million dollars. Dr. John B. Blake had been appointed Chief of the History of Medicine Division and supervised the move.

The historical collections have grown dramatically over the past two decades, through the acquisition of thousands of new items and through the transfer of thousands of volumes from the general collection. The Library's resources for research in the history of the health sciences are among the richest of any institution in the world. Included in these collections are many rare, even unique, treasures.



Painting of the United States Marine Hospital at Chelsea, Massachusetts by Ann Little Atkinson, 1830.

The History of Medicine Division currently houses all of the Library's materials printed before 1871, plus many thousands of later pamphlets, dissertations, and reference works, totalling close to 500,000 printed pieces. About 70,000 of these were printed before 1801. The Library's collection of medical incunabula is one of the largest in the world, totalling 516 works in 537 editions. Included in the historical collections are first editions of such medical classics as Vesalius' **De humani corporis fabrica** 1543, William Harvey's **De motu cordis** (1628), Edward Jenner's **Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolae Vaccination** (1798), and Rudolph Virchow's **Die Cellularpathologie** (1858). Although most of the collection represents European and American imprints, the Division does have a small collection of Arabic medical books and some 2,000 volumes of Chinese and Japanese medical works.

The Division also houses a large collection of manuscripts related to the history of medicine. Most of these date from the seventeenth century on, but the Library does own about 200 pre-1600 western and Arabic manuscripts. The oldest item in the Library is an Arabic manuscript by al-Razi dealing with gastrointestinal diseases, dating from 1094. The modern manu-

scripts collection, consisting of over 1,000,000 individual items, includes personal papers of noted scientists and health professionals (such as John Shaw Billings and George Martin Kober) and records of significant health-related institutions (such as the Association of American Medical Colleges). The collection includes handwritten letters from such notable medical figures as Louis Pasteur, Florence Nightingale and Benjamin Rush. About 200 oral history memoirs are also a part of this collection.

The prints and photographs collection of the Division contains approximately 70,000 items. It includes portraits, pictures of institutions, caricatures, and other types of images in a variety of media. The Library owns several thousand fine art prints, including works by such noted artists as Daumier, Gillray, Hogarth and Rowlandson. Prints relating to medicine and health care by contemporary artists are also added to the collection on a selective basis.

The historical collections of the National Library of Medicine are truly a national treasure. Taken together, this vast array of historical resources enables scholars to chart the past and provide us with an understanding of our health heritage.

Minute conforme

Paris, le 12 février 1887.

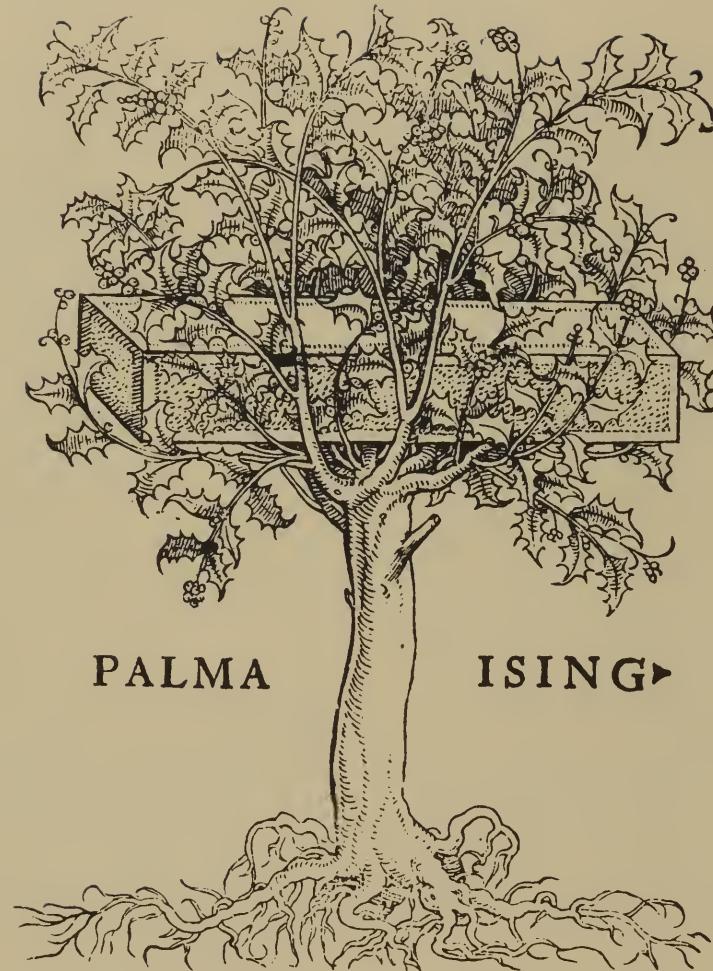
à M<sup>me</sup> Dr Alphonse Robin

Est-il possible, Monsieur, que vous ayiez  
écrit à un journal étranger dans le monde  
entier une appréciation <sup>anonyme</sup> aussi malveillante et sans  
connaissance du sujet que celle qui accompagne  
les écrits de la mort des enfants Allégret et Magendie,  
copiés par vous dans les "Annales de l'Institut Pasteur",  
du N° du 25 janvier ?

Ce serait maintenant votre devoir de venir  
porter ces faits et vos jugements si erronés  
devant l'Académie de médecine pour y  
entendre leur réfutation

L. Pasteur

Handwritten letter by Louis Pasteur, 1887.



Decorative printer's device or emblem, from Leonhart Fuchs' *De historia stirpium* (1542), forming a cross among the branches of a holly tree. The inscription "Palma Ising" (i.e., by the hand of Isingrin) identifies Michael Isingrin, the printer.